"My Own Chinese Romance"—By the American Wife

How the American College Girl, Bride of the Mandarin's Son, Went Bravely With Her Husband to Combat the Alien Traditions of His Native, Oriental Land

LAST week on these pages the author of this remarkable biography told of the gradual growth of her love for the Chinese student who was her classmate in the midwestern college. To-day she tells of the first months of her married life in America and of her arrival in China to begin there the new existence, which was to her such a deep mystery of the future. It might be well to say here that while the author of the biography remains for the present unidentified she is widely known in American and Asiatic diplomatic circles and also in Michigan, her home. Her Chinese husband was prominently connected with the Chinese Embassy in this country and in his own land was one of the foremost of the young and forceful spirits of new China.

"And before me stood little Ah Poh, Ah Ling and Ah Chin, the servants who were to introduce me to the mysteries of my Chinese home."

Chapter II.

THE deep affection and tenderness between us created subtle comprehensions too delicate to be put into words. A quick look interchanged during a pause in talk would often convey a complete thought. I always felt that Chan-King had acuter perceptions, more reserve and more imagination than I. Also he was meticulous—as I was not—in regard to small amenities. I had always been used to having my own way without causing discomfort to any one else, but I found that I could not speak carelessly or act thoughtlessly without the risk of violating his sense of the fitness of things. My greatest difficulty in the first few months of our marriage came from my constant effort to adjust my mode of thought and action to meet a highly trained and critical temperament to whom the second bests of association, spiritual or mental or material, were not acceptable. Yet, if he exacted much, he gave more. In everything he had a generosity so sincere and spontaneous that it aroused a like quality in me.

I am in many ways the elemental type of woman, requiring, I know, a certain measure of domination in love. It was imperative that I respect my husband, and it pleased me to discover in our several slight domestic crises that his was far the stronger will. I had taken my vow to obey, having specified that the word was not to be omitted from the marriage ceremony. How I should have kept it under a tyrannical will I do not know, for Chan-King was not a domestic dictator. He trusted my judgment in the handling of my share of our affairs and in later years often came to me for advice in his own. Nevertheless, morally, the balance of power was in his hands, and I was glad to leave it there. Often our disagreements would end in laughter because each one of us would give way gradually from the position first assumed until we had almost changed sides in the discussion. This happened again and again.

The American wife in this remarkable romance. For the present she remains anonymous, but she is well known in diplomatic circles.

From the very begnning I saw clearly by some grace the point at which Chan-King's Oriental mind and Occidental education came into the keenest conflict: my attitude toward other men and their attitude toward me. He was never meanly jealous or suspicious, but there was in him that unconquerable Eastern sense of exclusiveness in love, that cherishing of personal possession so incomprehensible to the average western imagination.

I had planned to instruct a young man in French during the summer months as a part of my vacation work, and I casually announced my intention to Chan-King. He opposed it at once, I thought unfairly. I was a great while persuading him to admit his real reasons for objecting. Finally I said somewhat at random "If my pupil were a girl you would not care."

"You have enough work as it is," he persisted, but without firmness, and his eyes flickered away from mine. I laughed a little. He turned to me a face so distressed that my smile died suddenly. "Oh, don't laugh!" he said, painfully in earnest. "You must keep in mind what you are to me. I—cannot be different. I am sorry."

I gave up my harmless young pupil and said nothing more. From that moment I began to form my entire code of conduct where men were concerned on a rigidly impersonal and formal basis. It was not difficult, for my first and only affection was centered in my husband, and the impulse to coquetry was foreign to my nature.

My husband's determination to leave my individuality untrammeled was sometimes overborne in small ways that delighted me by his innate sense of fitness. We played tennis and he played excellently. One day as we left the courts he said to me, "Tennis just isn't your game, Margaret. Your dignity is always getting in the way of your drive. I don't want you to give up your dignity—it is too much a part of you. But you might leave tennis alone and try archery. I am sure that is more suited to your type." The amused obedience with which I took his suggestion soon became enthusiasm for the new sport.

To me marriage had always seemed the most mystic and important of human relations, involving at times all the rest—and particularly parenthood. I am a born mother to whom the idea of marriage without children is unthinkable. Since I put away my dolls dream children had taken their place in the background of my fancy. I saw them vaguely at first, but with the coming of love I knew quite clearly how they would look. Now that I had married Chan-King I should have liked a child at once as a surer bond between us and a source of comfort for myself while he should be making his start in China. I knew that he loved children, for on several occasions I had deliberately put a tiny neighbor in his way and had taken note of his warm friendliness and gentleness with the wee thing. But fearing that he would be unwilling to accept a new responsibility while our affairs were still unsettled I put aside my desire for a child though my loved books were growing strangely irksome. I did not know that my husband shared the usual foreign belief that the American woman is an unwilling mother.

Then one day he went to call on a friend of his, a Chinese student whose wife and little son were with him. "I saw the Chinese baby," he told me with boyish eagerness. "He is going to have a little brother soon. Lucky baby!"

"Lucky parents!" I corrected him, and sighed enviously.

Chan-King looked at me, the wonder on his face growing into a delighted smile. "Do you mean it, Margaret?" he asked incredulously. Then we talked long and earnestly of our children. To Chan-King's Old World mind children should follow marriage as naturally as fruit the blossom, and his happiness in discovering that my ideals were exactly his own brought us to another plane of understanding and contentment with each other. Besides, he explained, a grandchild would do much to reconcile his parents to our marriage.

Happily, when the school terms was over I put aside my books for a needle. I had always been fond of sewing, but never had I found such fascinating work as the making of those tiny garments of silk and flannel and lawn. My practical mother protested against so much embroidering, but my husband only smiled as he rummaged gently through the basket of small sewing.

"You are a real Chinese wife, after all," he would say. "A Chinese wife sews and embroiders a great deal. She even makes shoes for the family."

"Shoes, Chan-King?"

"Shoes, no less. To make shoes beautifully is a fine art and a Chinese woman takes pride in excelling at it. She is proud of her feet and makes all her own slippers."

Then he would tell me stories of his childhood and recall memories of the closed garden in his old home, where he played at battledore with a tiny girl, while her mother and his mother sat together, embroidering and talking in low tones. The two young mothers were friends and were planning for the marriage of their son and daughter, which would strengthen the friendship into a family bond.

I took great interest in this little girl, who flitted through Chan-King's stories like a brilliant butterfly seen through a mist. Her name was Li-Ying and she was only 3 years old when she ran with her little feet still unbound, through those sweetly remembered green gardens of his childhood. Somewhere now she was sitting, her lily feet meekly crossed, embroidering shoes, waiting until her father should betroth her to another youth.

When Chan-King showed me a portrait of himself, taken in a group with his mother and father when he was 8 years old, I examined very thoughtfully the austerely beautiful face of the woman who had brought him into life. She sat on one side of the carved blackwood table. Her narrow, paneled skirt was raised a trifle to show her amazingly tiny feet. On the other side of the table sat Chan-King's father, an irreconcilably stern and autocratic looking man, magnificently garbed in the old style. Beside him stood a small, solemn boy, wearing a round cap, his queue still bound, he told me, with a red cord, his hands lost in the long velvet sleeves that reached almost to his knees. I put my finger on the head of this boy. "I hope our son will look exactly like him," I said.

At last the hoped for son was born and laid in my arms. He was swaddled and powdered and new and he wept for obscure reasons. But my husband and I smiled joyfully at the delicious, incredible resemblance of that tiny face to his own. Chan-King looked at him a long time a quizzical, happy smile in the corners of his mouth. Then he kissed me very gently and said, "He's a real Liang baby, Margaret. Are you glad?" I answered that I was glad, as I had been for everything love had brought to me.

Our plans progressed favorably and when our son Wilfred was five months old Chan-King returned to China. I told him good-by in the way I knew would please him most—calmly and without tears. But when it came to the last moment I felt unable to let him go. Mutely I clung to him, the baby on my arm between us.

"It won't be for long, this," he assured me. "We shall all be together at home very soon. You are brave and dear and true, Margaret. You shall never be made sorry. Be patient."

His first letters told of his new work in one of the older colleges for which Shanghai is famous. He also began his practice of law in an official capacity. His first step toward the diplomatic service had been taken.

At the end of four months I received his summons and went about making ready for the journey to China with my young son. My life work was to help my husband in making a home. His life work was in China. The conclusion was so obvious that neither I nor my parents had ever questioned it. But now that the moment had come the friends of the family were very much excited. They asked strange questions. Are you really going? How can you leave your mother? How can you give up beautiful America? Aren't you afraid to go to China? I answered as patiently and reasonably as I could. They wearied me very much.

Of China itself I had no clear conception, in spite of Chan-King's letters, for though my old prejudice had passed away, yet still I saw all the country only as a background for my husband's face.

I followed Chan-King's minute instructions concerning traveling arrangements, and Wilfred and I had a pleasant voyage. Early one morning I looked through the porthole and saw about me the murky waters of the Yangtse, alive with native craft, while dimly through the mist loomed the fortifications of Woosung. Already the tender was waiting, and soon we were aboard, moving rapidly up the mouth of the river. The mist cleared, green banks arose on each side and through distant trees gleamed red brick buildings like any at home side by side with the white plastered walls and tip tilted roofs of China. In that long ride Shanghai grew upon me gradually, a curious mixture of the known and the unknown, tantalizing me with the feeling that I had seen all this before and ought to remember it better. In the water about me steamer, launch and battleship mingled with native junk, river barge and houseboat. Suddenly in the waiting group on the customs jetty I saw my husband. In another moment we had drawn alongside the wharf and he was in the tender beside me, greeting me in the formally courteous manner he deemed suited to public occasions. Taking Wilfred in his arms, he drew me up the steps and to a waiting carriage.

Here again was the confused mingling of the strange and the familiar; clanging tramcars, honking automobiles, smooth rolling rickshaws, creaking wheelbarrows and lumbering, man drawn trucks; dark coolie faces under wide straw hats, gently bred features beneath pith helmets, black, bearded countenances below huge, gay turbans; a bewildering jumble of alien and English speech.

Even in Chan-King I found it. He was wearing American dress, his face had not changed, the tones of his voice were the same, but he was speaking Chinese and his directions to the mafoo were to me a meaningless succession of sounds.

But when he was beside me in the carriage and the horses had started he turned suddenly and smiled straight into my eyes. Then Shanghai, Borneo or the North Pole—all would have been one to me. I asked no questions; I was with my husband and child, driving rapidly toward the home prepared for me. I had come home to China.

My first impressions of Shanghai are a blur. My husband and I drove rapidly along the Bund, over Garden Bridge, which might have been any bridge in America, past the Astor House, which was very like any American hotel, and then along the Soochow Creek, which could be only in China.

On North Szechuan road we stopped at a li, or terrace, of newly built houses in the style called semi-foreign. This li, which was in the International Settlement, was very bright and clean. It opened upon the main thoroughfare. The heavy walls of bright red brick were interrupted at intervals by black doors bearing brass nameplates. At one of these my husband stopped and touched a very American looking push button. A bell trilled within and the door was opened by a smiling "boy" in a long blue cotton gown. We crossed a small courtyard, bright with flowers and vines and, coming to the main entrance, stepped directly into a large square room. It was cool, immaculate and restful. The matting covered floors, the skillfully arranged tables, chairs and sofa, the straight hangings of green and white, threaded with gold, were exactly what I should have wished to choose for myself. I was pleasantly surprised by the gas chandelier, with its shades of green and gold and white. A dark green gas radiator along one wall suggested that Shanghai was not always so warm as then. It was a very modest little home, befitting a man with his own way to make, Chan-King explained, as he led me through the rooms for a hasty survey. Then Wilfred was surrendered to his amah, a fresh cheeked young woman in stiffly starched blue "coat," white trousers and apron, while we made ready for a tiffin engagement with Chinese friends of Chan-King's.

After a short rickshaw ride—novel and delightful to me—we turned from the main road into another series of terraces and entered a real Chinese household. The host and hostess, who had both been in America and spoke excellent English, were very cordial in their welcome. I felt more at home than I had believed could be possible. Tiffin was served in the Chinese fashion, the guests seated at a great round table, with the dishes of meat, fish and vegetables placed in the center, so that each one could help himself as he chose. Individual bowls of rice, small plates, chopsticks and spoons were at each plate. Set at intervals were small, shallow dishes containing soy, mustard or catsup and also roasted melon seeds and almonds. When my hostess, who had thoughtfully rounded out her delicious Chinese menu with bread and butter and velvety ice cream, as thoughtfully produced a silver knife and fork for me, my husband explained that I was rather deft in the use of chopsticks. Though he had taught me during the early days of our marriage to use a slendor ivory pair that he possessed, I was now very nervous, but I felt obliged to prove his delighted assertion. So my social conformity as a Chinese wife began there, before a friendly and amused audience, who assured me that I did very well.

On the way home Chan-King said, "Will this be difficult for you, Margaret?"

"Chopsticks?" I asked gayly, well enough knowing that he did not mean chopsticks. "No, I like them."

"I mean everything," he said very gravely; "China—customs, people, homesickness, everything."

"You will see whether you haven't married a true Oriental," I answered him. "As for homesickness, why, Chan-King—I am at home."

The most important thing at first, materially speaking, was that Chan-King must make his own way, without help of any sort. And for the upper class Chinese this is very diffi-

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